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ABSTRACT

Two kinds of objections to bilingual education are examined in this paper. The philosophical objection questions whether the use of a foreign language in the U.S. educational system can be justified; the practical objection questions the usefulness of bilingual education in increasing educational achievement. Since misunderstandings about bilingual education and cultural identity are implicit in these objections, they are discussed at some length. Finally, a response is made to both kinds of objections. It is argued that bilingual education tends to produce a bilingual whose loyalty to this country is strong, that bilingualism is good for all Americans, and that bilingualism, far from being a fad, is on the rise. The apparent success, so far, of bilingual education is pointed out in response to the second type of objection, and diachronic studies are called for to determine the actual effectiveness of bilingual education in academic and social achievement. By way of conclusion, bilingual education is termed the single most important effort of modern American education to break with ethocentric rigidity. (AM)

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"Controversial Aspects of Bilingual Education"

Lecture presented at Indiana University, Bloomington, April 10, 1975, in the Series of Lectures on Chicano Research Perspectives.

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A. OBJECTIONS AGAINST BILINGUAL EDUCATION

1. Introduction

Bilingual education can be understood as systematic instruction in two languages (the dominant language of the larger social group, and the native language of the culturally different group), with emphasis in the maintenance and development of the native language and culture of the child with limited English speaking ability.

There are two kinds of objections raised against bilingual education. One, based on philosophical grounds, questions the justification of the use of languages other than English as a means of instruction, and the maintenance of languages and cultures that are foreign to this country, which is seen as a threat to the peaceful unity of this country. Another type of objection, based on practical considerations, voices doubts with respect to the usefulness of bilingual education for the purpose of increasing the educational achievement of culturally different children in our schools.

2. Objections Based on Philosophical Grounds

To better understand the background and implications of this type of objection, it is important to recognize the fact that bilingual education has reached its recent proportions because it has been considered as an application of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act which condemns the failure of educational institutions to overcome

language barriers that impede equal participation of students (Congressional Record, 1973, S 18810). As Nathan Glazer, the well known professor of education and social structure at Harvard, points out, we HAD an ideology in this country to justify the surrendering of one's distinctive cultural characteristics and the assimilation to the dominant society. But this ideology is rejected now: "the model of the melting pot and the rhetoric of Americanization are gone" (1974:56).[1/] What ideology will substitute the myth of the melting pot, it is not clear. What is quite clear is that the demand for ethnic cultural curriculum components and for bilingual education are suspect of lacking seriousness, authenticity and appropriateness. "Is bilingual education a fad? Is it good for America?" The argument insists that the "Americanization" of previous immigrants was a unique and successful achievement. Those immigrants willingly gave up their old language and culture and put their loyalties with the now society into which they assimilated rapidly. By implication, any efforts to maintain other languages and cultures are assumed to weaken the allegiance and commitment to common political values, and consequently to endanger the unity of the U. S. Therefore, it is argued, ethnic identity and adherence to given linguistic and cultural groups in this country is at best an opportunistic way of asserting claims to greater participation on state or federal funds, if not outright separatist intent on the part of ethnic minorities.

1/ Nathan Glazer, "Ethnicity and the Schools," Commentary, September 1974, p. 56.

3. Objections Based on Empirical Grounds

The second type of objection against bilingual education is not unrelated to the first. Bilingual education is supposed to provide equal educational opportunities for persons of limited English speaking ability. But, the argument goes, "is it true, in fact, that the teaching of the native tongue increases the capability of children to achieve in the regular classroom, and that the emphasis on native cultures prepares this child to face the challenges of American society?" Implicit in this argument, as made by Glazer, Moynihan, and Dahrendorf,[2/] for example, is the statement that "Men are not equal;" that is, there are obvious group and individual differences in achievement, in exploitation of the same human and physical environment, and the difference can be explained by the cultural traditions and norms peculiar to social groups, as well as by the innate individual personal characteristics. Further, implicit in this argument, is the assumption that the rewards of rapid assimilation into the dominant society are such, that it is irrational for immigrants not to assimilate: "Why should a Mexican-American, or a Pole, want to perpetuate his native culture, when he can achieve rapid upper social mobility if he assimilates?" Bilingual education, in this view, is superfluous or even counter-productive; at the most, it is a device slowing down the inevitable natural process of assimilation of foreigners; perhaps a manipulation on the part of an elite of "ethnic" bureaucrats who profit from state and federal spending in bilingual education. Thus, in this view, bilingual education is bound to fail and disappear as

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2/ N. Glazer and D. P. Moynihan, "Why Ethnicity," Commentary, October 1974, p. 35. Dahrendorf as cited by Glazer and Mohnihan.

other fads. It will last only for as long as the ethnic bureaucrats need it in their struggle for political and economic power.

These two types of objections are probably the most frequently discussed and written about. They are very serious objections and it is not easy to offer an appropriate reply. Since, implicit in those objections, there is an element of misunderstanding of bilingual education, and a misconception of what culture and cultural identity, and I would like to present my own views on culture, cultural differences, before I respond to these objections.

B. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION

1. Culture

"Culture" has been an elusive and pervasive concept which has troubled anthropologists for the last hundred years. Early anthropologists formulated definitions of culture as a progressive development from savage life style to western civilization. Thus, Tylor in 1871 sees culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Culture did not refer to specific life styles of any social groups as distinct from others in the same evolutionary stage. The conception of culture in a piecemeal or mosaic fashion contrasted "primitive" cultures with European cultures, with reference to eating and dressing patterns, artifacts, and especially to the kinship and marriage systems assumed to evolve towards the European monogamous pattern. Cultural similarities were explained in terms of diffusion. In the 1930's there is clear-cut distinction between what is determined genetically and what is learned.

Linton speaks of culture as "social inheritance." Much before Linton, Franz Boas had used the concept of culture to describe distinctive behavioral characteristics of specific communities and speaks of the transmission and learning of behavioral patterns which constitute a peculiar linguistic and cultural tradition. Historical accidents and environmental limitations have been increasingly used to explain cultural developments and peculiarities. Thus, gradually anthropologists have come to realize that culture is, as Goodenough states it: "what is learned, the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others including the material manifestations of what is learned...," that is a set of norms of behavior. (Goodenough 1971: 19.)[3/] But this set of norms of behavior is a mental construct in the minds of individuals who share much of the content of those norms: the organization of their real and phenomenal world experiences, their belief system, their hierarchies of preferences or value system, their appropriate procedures to interact with each other. The fact that such individuals share all of the above allows them to predict appropriate kinds of behavior, to interpret their human and physical environment in a similar way, to feel similar things about daily experiences, and to organize their entire cognitive style in comparable fashion. It would only be fair to say that this most recent reconceptualization of culture has been the result of intensive influence from the study of language and linguistic behavior. The realization that language norms for linguistic behavior can be paralleled with other norms of behavior has created a new breed of anthropologists in the last fifteen years. Anthropologists see individuals as the most creative and dynamic organizers of cultural systems. Human societies

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[3/] W. H. Goodenough, "Culture, Language and Society," an Addison Wesley Module in Anthropology, 1971.

are continually discovering new ways of expressing, classifying, and interpreting daily human experiences and cultural domains as one social group gets in touch with another.

2. Implications of This New Concept of Culture for Bilingual Bicultural Education

In previous decades culture contacts were described in terms of relative dominance of one with respect to the other: assimilation, acculturation, conquest, colonialism, are examples of such processes. These concepts have tended to minimize the significance and dynamism of the role played by the culturally different groups getting in contact with larger social groups. American educators have described the "melting pot" process in oversimplistic terms and have traditionally looked at the school as the institution par excellence responsible for "assimilating" foreigners and turning them into acceptable Americans. International and national historical accidents have forced the American schools to reexamine the myth of the melting pot and redefine their mission. Today many people recognize the creativity and potentialities of groups of individuals who can effectively operate in two or more different linguistic and cultural environments. Schools have been charged with the new mission of facilitating the maintenance and development of native languages and cultures of culturally different children. On the one hand, cultural identity is rooted in the social order which makes social behavior predictable and acceptable. On the other hand, any drastic changes in this order may jeopardize the person's ability to function effectively and to see objectively his/her personal worth. Bilingual education, community development, and special education programs are intended to create a new sense of self-esteem,

both individually and collectively. Thus, forced total immersion of the culturally different child into the "melting pot" of the all-English speaking school may in fact (and has in some instances) have the most devastating effects on the subsequent development of basic and more complex skills required for learning. The progressive accumulative effects of an imposed social order can lead the child to reject his language, family, beliefs, values, and himself. This is a rational explanation for the high drop-out rates of culturally different children from our schools.

In this context bilingualism and biculturalism can be seen as a possible alternative in a conscious modern multicultural America. To what extent and degree is this possible? What are the real capabilities of educational institutions to provide the proper climate for bilingual bicultural education? The theoretical implications of any position of biculturalism are much too complex to be explored in this brief presentation but very important for an understanding, planning, and evaluation of bilingual bicultural education.

C. RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS

1. Response to Objections Based on Philosophical Grounds

First of all, the purpose of bilingual and bicultural education is obviously not to maintain the child monolingual and monocultural in his native language and culture; not to make him monolingual in the second language; on the contrary, to develop a coordinate bilingual person, that is, one who is capable of thinking and feeling in either of two languages independently, and of interacting effectively and appropriately in two different linguistic and cultural groups. We cannot accept the assumption that the maintenance and development of the native language and culture IMPEDES the acquisition of a second language and culture; this assumption does, in fact, contradict the experience and studies we have so far done (those of Lambert, for example, and those produced by the Bilingual Education Unit, OSPI in Illinois, etc.). The fact that in the U. S. most children happen to be monolingual should not be considered a universal phenomenon. By the same token, the assumption that the maintenance of native language and culture ultimately weakens the commitment of immigrant groups to this country is also gratuitous. In fact there is evidence to the contrary. The loyalty of Japanese immigrants who lost their possessions and freedom was rarely shaken in the concentration camps. Immigrants have generously given their share of sacrifice, lives and material possessions for the ideals of this country. Take, for example, the case of Vietnam: 21 percent of all casualties corresponded to Americans of Spanish-speaking ancestry, in spite of the fact that the Spanish-speaking population is only 5 percent of the total U. S. population.

Perhaps what we want to investigate is the reasons (so convincing to those who object to bilingual education) why an immigrant has to reject his language and culture, his past, his heritage and his values in order to become a "good citizen?" This rejection is not going to help him learn English and understand the Anglo-American life style. Why should it be only one way to "good citizenship," that is, ASSIMILATION, instead of biculturalism/bilingualism? Why does it have to be an either-or QUESTION? There are very good reasons to argue that forced assimilation is bad for America, and that bilingualism, not only for children of limited English-speaking ability, but for ALL American children, is good. The desirability of fluency in other languages and of familiarity with other cultures is undeniable on the basis of economic, political and social advantages for any country, including the U. S. Perhaps the misconception of American society as monolingual and monocultural was as unreal as the myth of the melting pot. Today there is a new awareness of a multicultural and pluralistic America, where basic loyalties to this country are not measured by the accent of the immigrants or other behavioral peculiarities, but by their effective commitment to work and serve this country unconditionally and consistently.

The argument that bilingual education is only a fad is the most unwarranted of all. We know that the number of speakers of foreign languages (including bilinguals in English and their native tongue) is increasing rapidly. Dr. Anthony Pasquariello, former president of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, now at the University of Illinois in Urbana, says that the estimated Spanish-speaking population in 1972 was over 16 million, with 2 million children

in elementary schools, and that--I quote--"these are not foreigners in our midst, and Spanish is no longer a 'foreign' language in this country."[4/] My suspicion is that bilingual education will continue to increase rapidly, as the Spanish and other "foreign" language speaking populations continue to grow in this country.

2. Response to Objections Based on Empirical Grounds

Bilingual education with its emphasis on language and culture maintenance may have antecedents going back at least a century, but in its present form and proportions, as organized federally or state funded enterprise, is only a recent experiment. Thus, it is indeed too early to evaluate its effects and long term trajectory. Premature claims of failure are as unjustified as those of total success. We believe that there are many programs that seem quite successful, because the children in those programs do in fact operate freely and fluently in two different languages. Most of these programs are in the Southwest where the social and cultural conditions of life are of great incentive for bilingualism and biculturalism. We need to study these programs diachronically, and test rigorously and realistically the effectiveness of those activities generated in the bilingual programs to see the degree to which these activities are responsible for the overall success. We do not know, for sure, that everywhere bilingual education has increased educational and social opportunities for children with limited English speaking ability. But we do know that no bilingual education program has decreased these opportunities either. We also know that some bilingual education programs have in fact made the

[4/] Presidential Address to the AATSP, December 30, 1972.

difference in students' academic performance. We also know that the traditional all English-speaking school system has failed many children whose native language was other than English. The reports from the Civil Rights Commission on Mexican Americans in the Southwest, as well as studies on Puerto Rican Drop Outs done by Dr. Isidro Lucas in Illinois, and many other studies, indicate low achievement of the Spanish-speaking students and an unjustifiable neglect of these students by our schools. The school system has, of course, failed some groups to a higher degree than others. Why, for example, Chinese and Japanese students do better than the Black and the Spanish-speaking? There are many and complex reasons. The question is whether the school can do something about it and how soon. Bilingual education is an attempt to do something about it, and a legitimate effort to establish AN OPTION, not an imposition. Parents, or whoever speak for the child of limited English ability, are entitled, not forced, to use this option for their children. The argument that sees bilingual education as a manipulation by "ethnic" bureaucratic may have some truth. We can first recognize the fact that there are bureaucrats and politicians trying to exploit genuine needs of people; there is nothing new about it. But "ethnic" bureaucrats do have a constituency which makes it possible for them to continue to hold some power. This constituency has corrected abuses and will probably continue to do so.

D. CONCLUSION

In spite of all the problems, uncertainties and controversies on bilingual education, today we can see bilingual education programs as the single most important effort made by modern American educators to break

with a tradition of ethnocentric rigidity and respond to the needs of culturally different children with a new educational philosophy. Only time and history will be able to assess the authenticity and long range consequences of this effort.

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